WHY POETRY? BECAUSE POETRY

Because there were sounds in the dome of my sickness, rhythms and rants beating down on the tent full of oxygen, then when the dome was removed, still a drum all around me. I live in a drum, that is why.

I live in a drum and you live in a drum and someone must beat back from inside, I guess.

Mother at the kitchen table reading a letter from some glamorous place in the world where her friend has a layover, dropping a line, saying, Look at me flying the friendly skies; who would have thought it when we, barely into our twenties, wore stockings and swam in the secretarial pool? All the men in suits who flirt as she unlids the tiny airplane bottles of whiskey! All the exotic destinations! Mother on a layover from three kids under five, at the kitchen table writing back about her grounded life. I’m the one she’s named after her stewardess friend. I’m the one, she tells her friend, who babbles on and on and makes up songs. Mother tells her friend in the same letter that she plans on writing stories, since she has a little time at home to write. She doesn’t say impossible, or mention the fights with my father she’s already learned she’ll never win.

I’m the one who babbles on and on and makes up songs.

Two forms of input: the radio and a succession of books from the library whose floor looks and smells like packed brown sugar. News from beyond. The heart has no shape until someone instructs you to fold the red paper and cut where the curves have been drawn with a crayon. This is a heart? you ask, showing the shape to the teacher. When she nods, you have a name and a picture and now are aware of your insides.

Things that I said to some kids and adults confused them at first and then they became furious. Bruising and bruised.

Because lawns and lawns and lawns and lawns. Because flowers. Because the Goodyear Blimp floated over my city each summer and I fixed my sights on the miniscule cabin’s invisible pilot. Because stone-throwing. Because sticks and names and never will they hurt you. Because bones. Because boom.

Because all things were possible outside of driving, arm-wrestling, and guns.

Because nothing I ever could say would make anyone happy, though I heard my drunk father downstairs playing song after song on the hi-fi looking for something essential.

Because I still think that one little song could change everything, lift up the needle and lower it into the first groove until there’s no groove anymore. Suddenly, it’s all a pod fastened tiny to my daughter’s waist as she’s jogging through Kensington...
Gardens. And I realize how small all these decades have been, they can fit in _________.

Because when his work friend was killed during an arrest, he screamed in the middle of the street in his uniform, gun in his holster, whiskey in his blood, and the neighbors all watched and heard and pitied and thought how ironic it was that they thought they should call the police.

My first poetry reading: the speech he gave the neighbors about how hard it was to be.

Because an old woman opened her door to me each night to pray the radio rosary. I kneeled against the stereo console, made a steeple with my hands. The glorious, joyful, and sorrowful mysteries blew through the days like the gust, gale, the whip, and the breeze through the metal screens of summer doors and windows. In the winter, Amen shriveled like a gourd in which a candle stub still burns though you can’t see it.

Because from East to West a perfect offering is made. Because life would be ecstasy, you and me endlessly. Because crimson and clover over and over. And this is the forest primeval.

Before I went to Catholic school, I went to the public school where there was an experiment underway. Instead of learning the alphabet, we were given 26 beetles. Each one was different from the other, some more strikingly different than others. They were kept in a box until the teacher said, “Time to write.” Then, we were allowed to lower one side of the box; as from a ramp releasing circus animals and weary handlers from a box car, the beetles crawled down to a wide plain of newsprint. Without touching them or prodding them into position, we had to make sounds to try to influence their arrangement relative to one another. These were my first written sentences.

It went so well with beetles for me, I trained this on the rest of the animate world. Einstein’s definition of insanity. Marx’s definition of history. Ghandi’s definition of change. My mother’s definition of Norman Vincent Peale.

Because of little notebooks left around the house, in hampers even, like those bottles women in sad movies tried to hide.

Because I found a carrel in the library for studying in college, and when I was there I was nowhere but not dead, and outside the window, Berryman, Icarean, was falling to the Mississippi River, and Plath was stopping up the gap beneath the bedroom door with an old blanket, and Cummings referred to a blue-eyed boy who was somehow both me and my father. Both Berryman and Berryman’s father had the same name as my father.

Names will always hurt me.

Because nostalgia, rage, and sentimentality wander in search of a body. They fill the air like fumes of gas or heat rising up from the pavement, like radiation leaked from Pennsylvania, Chernobyl, Nevada, or Japan. Like radio waves. Like echoes. At the same time, I struggle to stay in my body. When I do I’m a dish: satellite, petri, urn, patten, pelvis. It’s a perfect combination, or a quaintly missed connection.

So it’s stanzas instead.

Stanza means room and adding on and adding on and adding on, the self manufacturing fascia and gathering glue where it can.

Or the world of discourse in one’s certain time including all that has ever been thought or said up to the point of one’s certain time is a wall of prose, and poetry’s the mortar—a metaphor that gives a central role to poetry. Unless one considers the dry wall.

Because to build a dry wall you must put all of the right stones in the right order.

Because something there is that does like a wall, and something there is that doesn’t.

Or less central because the mortar is interstitial and incidental and replaceable.

Because Raymond’s wall contains his business card and a short poem I wrote about a man who shot three cops who came to his house on a domestic call. Because the poem and the card fit in a metal cigarillo box. Because people in the future should have their screens scratched a little with our tawdry pasts.

To be sure, there are iambic walls in the suburbs. A shopping mall sits like a caller in their midst and the line dance of development proceeds apace.

Because I fail at everything else and probably fail at this too.

The cops died that day because a dog pissed on the rug. Hence the argument that led the young man’s mother to call.

Because success is the soles of one’s feet, and bank statements are eloquent in their own way.
Because Santa’s wide lap is a slippery slope and the miniature train that circled his department store throne no less primitive than the drawings in the caves of Lascaux.

Though to point this out is not only not helpful but redundant.

Because it makes nothing happen and saves no one from death or oppression or drink or dementia or dogs that are foaming at the muzzle. Because through it one opts out of usefulness and so relies on offerings from the worldly community, in the manner of monks and nuns. Because look how many people opt out or try to opt out while still getting daily bread!

Because cynicism seeks its own level, as does joy, and when the two meet, there’s a struggle in the air, as when gods grapple, then a bit of pyrotechnics followed by a safe re-seeding of the ground with sparks

which yield only the next day, which would have come anyway.

But maybe it comes with an unbidden something tucked behind the ears, little tubes that are tight scrolls the pulp of which could hold: a prayer, a curse, a recipe for being kind or cruel, a list of grocerries or friends, a reversible version of The Serenity Prayer, a poem that is an axe that breaks the frozen sea or rip-rap on the slick rock of metaphysics or simply a way of touching under the skin without having to touch the skin.

Because routine domestics should not lead to death. Because everything leads there, and nothing leads back from.

Because Horseman Pass By.

June is a pair of parted lips, and January glares from behind the chicken-wire glass of the door whose sign reads, Elopement Risk.

The story where it finally stopped for me, I tossed a sheet over the window-sill, we went to tie the knot. But it’s a slipknot, poetry.